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C E N T R A L I N T E L L I G E N C E A G E N C Y
O F F I C E O F N A T I O N A L E S T I M A T E S

18 December 1953

STAFF MEMORANDUM NO. 419

SUBJECT: The Beria Indictment: End of a Purge

1. The public indictment and committal for trial of Lavrenti Beria and six close MVD associates appears to be the formal close of a quiet and efficient purge that has been underway in the Soviet ruling hierarchy since last June. The comparatively unspectacular character of the charges against Beria and his alleged accomplices (most of the charges date back to the civil war period and the late thirties), the small number of accused officials and their clear identification with the police apparatus, and the special procedure adopted for the forthcoming trial -- all suggest that the purge of Beria adherents has been completed and that the Beria affair will be closed promptly with little commotion and scrupulous "legal" propriety. Evidently the Malenkov regime has decided against staging a mammoth public trial, like those of the thirties, which would generate widespread terror and would operate against the regime's current efforts to gain popular support.

2. The charges contained in the pre-trial indictment indicate that the regime wishes to give the impression that the Beria apparatus is not at present a threat to the regime. The indictment points out that Beria lacked "social support within the USSR" and by implication indicates that the regime can rely upon the "honest workers in the MVD" and the "honest cadres" in the state to serve it loyally. In particular, the peculiar reference to Beria's machinations against Orzhonikidze, who died at the height of the Great Purge in 1937 amid rumors of conflict with Stalin and intimations of foul play, suggests that the regime is anxious to resolve the struggle for power within the Kremlin and to trim down the MVD without generating new fears in the bureaucracy. In a sense, also, the charges against Beria are a public indictment of police arbitrariness under Stalin and a tacit promise of a more secure future to those who will play ball now. Liquidating a Soviet police chief calculated always to evoke popular approbation.

3. The naming of only six co-conspirators with Beria, all of them police functionaries, is particularly likely to relieve fears among the ranks of the bureaucracy, which has been experiencing the largest turnover of high ranking personnel since the late thirties.

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Of the accused officials about whom information exists, three, Dekanozov, Kobulov, and Meshik, were removed summarily without fanfare within a week after the announcement of Beria's arrest. None of the leading Party figures in the post-Stalin shake-up — Ignatiev, Melnikov, Bagirov, Arutyunov, Andrianov, to mention a few — have been indicted, although these men were removed amidst much publicity and severe criticism, including some overtones of association with Beria. Thus, it appears likely that the real political purge will remain an unobtrusive affair, while the general administrative shake-up, designed to reduce bureaucratic incompetence, will continue to gain publicity but will not mean death for the victims.

4. The announcement that the Beria trial will be treated in the manner prescribed by the law of December 1, 1934, provides the clearest indication that the indictment of Beria does not herald a garish public trial like those of the thirties. Under this law, which was invoked for the in camera trial of Marshal Tukhachevsky and the leading Soviet generals in 1937, hearings are held without counsel. Death sentences are mandatory for the guilty and are executed immediately after sentence is passed. Most of the Great Purge trials of 1937-1938 were conducted under a different procedure. Beria and the accused have allegedly already confessed their guilt, and it appears probable that Beria's execution will be announced without a great deal of denunciatory public breast beating.

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